Neighborhood Watch Improves
the Public’s Health as it Prevents Crime

By
Rashida Lawrence

A Master's Paper submitted to the faculty of
the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Public Health in
the Public Health Leadership Program.

Chapel Hill
2011

Advisor signature/printed name

Second Reader Signature/printed name

4/14/11 Date
Abstract

Neighborhood Watch is a community crime prevention program in the United States which coordinates police departments with citizens and residents. Today’s transient society produces communities that are less personal. Many families have two working parents and children involved in many activities that keep them away from home. An empty house in a neighborhood where none of the neighbors know the owner is a prime target for burglary, and other acts of crime. In Durham, NC’s District 2 alone, there were 115 crimes reported in July 2008 relevant to break-ins, robberies, and aggravated assaults (DPD, 2011).

Obvious impacts of crime on public health may include physical injury, disability, death from violent assaults, abuse and accidents, including those caused by dangerous driving, and the associated physical and psychological consequences (Goodwin, 2004). Neighborhoods and communities that have established neighborhood watch programs are more likely to have higher amounts of social support and social capital compared to those neighborhoods who may suffer from crime, environmental decay, and urban blight. More neighborhood watch program interventions are needed to effectively prevent crime and increase social capital. Preventing crime, particularly in those areas most affected, would improve health (Goodwin, 2004).

Neighborhoods and Social Support

As discussed by the European Union Public Health Information System, social support is the individual belief that one is cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligations (EUPHIS, 2009). In
order for social support to be a functional aspect within neighborhoods and communities, the barrier to social change within the community needs to be addressed with communitarian modifications so that all citizens will be benefit from positive interventions such as a Neighborhood Watch program to reduce crime and impact public health.

Impact of Community Views. There are several commonly dysfunctional ways that citizens view their communities. For example, Peter Block discusses the current way of retributive thinking where the community and its citizens are constantly perpetuating mental models of the past and having the same conversations of how the community is viewed, seeing it as a set of problems related to housing, health care, the environment, youth at risk, race, the disabled, poverty, unemployment, public education, transportation, and drugs (Block, pg. 32). Block states that ‘the context of retribution and the story that grows out of it cause our attempts to build community to be what actually keeps it unchanged’ (Block, pg. 45). This means that change within the community cannot occur unless we change the ‘story’, which is what we currently believe about the community and its citizens, including the type of advertising ‘that exploits the fear we have of violence, of the urban core, of terrorism, of African Americans and other ethnic groups, of immigrants, of those who are poor or undereducated, of other religions, and of other countries’ (Block, pg. 38). This is further exacerbated by the media, which markets fear about our self and other groups which is a ‘subtle but clear argument against diversity and inclusion’ (Block, pg. 38). As Etzioni concludes, ‘we should not treat violence, drug abuse, illegitimacy, promiscuity, abusive attitudes towards people of different backgrounds, alcoholism, poor academic performance and other social maladies as
isolated phenomena’ (Etzioni, Character Education pg. 1). We need to be inclusive in promoting positive social values within the community instead.

Community Leadership. In terms of belonging in a community, Block says that ‘to belong to a community is to act as a creator or co-creator of that community’ (Block, pg. xii). The nature of belonging to a community would mean that citizens would need to nurture and build upon the community’s existence through accountability. What makes citizens accountable is the acknowledgement of their responsibility to initiate change. According to Block, the lack of citizen accountability allows the blame to be placed on public leaders when something happens, which sustains the idea that ‘leaders are cause and all others are effect’ (Block, pg. 41). This contributes to the retributive culture of the community. Given the importance of recognizing retributive mental models, it is also essential to recognize new views of the community and neighborhood.

To move toward an alternative future, restoration must take place among citizens within the community. This begins with creating conversations amongst members of the community that ‘produces new energy rather than holding us in place’ (Block, pg. 47). Through Block’s insight, a citizen can be an effective leader in the community through the following (as mentioned on pg. 65):

- Hold oneself accountable for the well-being of the larger collective of which we are a part.
- Choose to own and exercise power rather than defer or delegate it to others.
- Enter into a collective possibility that gives hospitable and restorative community its own sense of being.
- Acknowledge that community grows out of the possibility of citizens.
Attend to the gifts and capacities of all others, and act to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center.

Accepting accountability rather than entitlement (Block, pg. 48) allows the current context to be changed from retribution to restoration, which means that citizens change their thinking about the community from ‘a problem to be solved to a possibility to be lived into’ (Block, pg. 53). As indicated by Etzioni, no one is ‘entitled to the community’s approval, as this must be earned’ (Etzioni, pg. 116). Citizens within a community who engage in positive activities within their neighborhood and go beyond what is required of them as law abiding citizens do so in seeking ‘the approbation of their fellow members of the community’ (Etzioni, pg. 116). As citizens, we often have the expectation that law enforcement, public leaders, and elected officials must fix the social problems of society. As Etzioni states, ‘too often we demand rights without assuming responsibilities, pursue entitlements while shying away from obligations’ (Etzioni, pg. 1). This misconception contributes to the weakening of America’s moral and social fabric, as postulated by Etzioni. To strengthen the social fabric of the community, it is important for citizens to engage in positive activities for the common good of the neighborhood.

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam says that “social capital can thus be simultaneously a “private good” and a “public good” (Putnam, pg. 20), as bystanders may gain benefits of social capital, while some of the benefit may generate immediately to persons making the investment. For example, many neighborhoods participate in ‘National Night Out’ on an annual basis, which is sponsored through the city’s police department in coordination with communities and neighborhoods to raise awareness for crime prevention. This evening event mobilizes neighborhoods to fight crime and
promote crime prevention, and at the same time, allows neighbors and police staff to interact socially. Putnam calls this “community policing”, where police departments across the country began to implement a kind of “applied social capitalism, seeking to fight crime by building working partnerships between law enforcement officials and community residents (Putnam, pg. 317). Because the participation in ‘National Night Out’ is done solely on a voluntary basis of the neighborhoods, it indicates the willingness of the citizens to go beyond what is expected of them. Voluntary participation shows accountability and sets the stage for fighting neighborhood crime.

Impact of Crime

The interest of establishing a Neighborhood Watch program for my community began when I purchased my home in October 2008. The location of the home was not in the most desirable location of the city due to higher rates of crime (Fig 1). I noticed that many surrounding neighborhoods that had ‘Neighborhood Watch’ indicator signs also had manicured lawns, paved streets, sidewalks, and lower crime rates. This was evidence of the positive impact that the Neighborhood Watch program had on those communities and was indicative of the social support within those neighborhoods. Surrounding these communities were recreational parks in close proximity, walking trails, and schools which seem to positively contribute to the overall quality of life in those areas. Given this observation, it is important to understand that the physical features of neighborhoods can be significant indicators of the well-being of the citizens and residents in the community. The physical characteristics of a neighborhood can “influence the level of
daily stress imposed upon residents” (Cutrona et al, 2008). Such characteristics can greatly influence the health and well-being of the community in general.

**Impact of physical characteristics.** Physical characteristics such as vandalism, graffiti, and property crime rates have a distinct impact on the attractiveness of a neighborhood. According to Sampson and Raudenbush, “minor forms of public disorder, if unchecked, lead to a downward spiral of urban decay and crime” (Sampson and Raudenbush, pg. 7). Such characteristics within a neighborhood can lead to neighborhood disorder, which “has been linked to declines in individual health and well-being (Sampson and Raudenbush, pg. 7). Consequences of neighborhood disorder can further lead to physical ailments, depression, psychological stress, and perceived powerlessness rises as postulated by Sampson and Raudenbush. Physical characteristics are external factors of neighborhoods; however they may influence internal factors of institutions in the community such as schools.

Limbos and Casteel found that “schools in disadvantaged, disorganized communities have been found to have higher rates of violence” (Limbos and Casteel, pg. 540). This implies that advantaged communities contain schools that have lower rates of violence. In addition the cause of “high rates of violence in certain communities is proposed to be the lack of effective social organization” (Limbos and Casteel, pg. 540). School and neighborhood level factors were found to be associated with increasing crime rates in secondary schools. Prevention efforts within schools “should include school and community partnerships to address these potentially modifiable factors” (Limbos and Casteel, pg. 539).
Crime statistics for Durham, NC. In 2008, crime statistics for the district 2 Durham area were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Durham Police Department Crime Statistics - May 2008</th>
<th>District 1</th>
<th>District 2</th>
<th>District 3</th>
<th>District 4</th>
<th>District 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggravated Assault</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break-Ins</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicle Theft</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1: Durham Crime Statistics, 2008*

Health Impact. From the statistics indicated, crime varied across the districts of Durham, NC in 2008. As indicated by Godwin, “indirect effects of crime include the impact on victims’ health of time off work, financial losses, and changes in home circumstances” (Godwin, pg. 27). From the statistics above, it can be inferred that District 2 residents who were victims of crime, may have sustained significant health stressors due to the numbers of robberies, aggravated assaults, break-ins, larcenies, and vehicle thefts compared to the other districts within the city. In addition, higher rates of crime cause individuals to have “consequences of higher rates of mental health problems, smoking, alcohol and drug misuse, and neglect of their health and risky sexual behavior” (Godwin, pg. 27). It can be inferred that those residents in the District 5 area may in fact
have lower rates of health stressors from crime factors than residents in districts 1-4 of the city, based on the crime statistics.

In addition, neighborhood improvement initiatives can also impact mental health of the community. As discussed by Cutrona, Wallace, and Wesner, “the most efficient way to improve mental health in impoverished neighborhoods is to improve the quality of the neighborhoods” (Cutrona et al, pg. 5). Facilitation of change could positively affect this aspect to reduce physical cues of blight such as trash, loitering, abandoned buildings, and other signs of urban decay.

Sampson and Raudenbush also found that “neighborhood social and ethnic composition were powerfully linked to perceptions of disorder, in particular, concentrated poverty, the proportion of blacks, and the proportion of Latinos in a neighborhood were related positively and significantly to perceived disorder” (Sampson and Raudenbush Pg. 9). Although these findings determined a relationship between disorder and race, the perceptions of disorder were “heavily influenced by the racial and class composition of the neighborhood. This implies that residents in the neighborhood may not have close relationships among each other due to the perceived disorder and influence of race.

Socialization. Neighborhood Within the social aspect of neighborhoods, Greenbaum and Greenbaum write that “when unlike people live close together, they will become friends much more frequently than is likely to occur among unlike people who live apart” (Greenbaum and Greenbaum, pg. 53). This suggests that the social cohesion of residents living in close proximity increases the social support of those living close together in the community. Family and economic characteristics of an urban neighborhood may greatly influence the informal social relations of city residents, as
described by Bell and Boat (pg. 398). Social relations among neighbors could lead to change in other aspects of the social environment.

As Wilson mentions, “neighborhoods that become organized are empowered to address other needs such as safety, education, health, and employment” (Wilson, pg. 2). Perhaps a neighborhood watch program for communities could be a building block to greater initiatives for neighborhoods. As Wilson says, “most people scarcely know their neighbors, but there is nothing like a common goal…to bring people together” (Wilson, pg. 3). Authors concur that social capital consists of a set of components found in social associations and interactions among people that, when activated, empower individuals and facilitate cooperation toward a mutual benefit (Ferguson and Mindel, pg. 2). This further validates the importance of community partnerships and residents within neighborhoods.

Conclusion

Crime in neighborhoods greatly influences the well-being of individuals within the neighborhood. Neighborhoods with high levels of crime factors related to robberies, break-ins, physical assaults, and other social stressors can have substantial health effects on the individual. Residents within the community may experience mental health issues, psychological distress, depression, and physical ailments. These factors can lead to other consequences of health related to alcoholism, smoking, and risky social behaviors. With increased social support and social capital, neighborhood residents could establish an intervention such as a Neighborhood Watch Program to alleviate the influences of crime.
What Can Be Done Differently

In terms of neighborhood socialization, Kim and Schweitzer say that “we could build social capital by promoting socializing among residents at the block level” (Kim and Schweitzer, pg. 7). Activities within neighborhoods should be linked to the promotion of socialization among residents, with face to face interaction at first. In the first initiation of recruiting neighborhood watch participants, letters were sent out to home owners who were residents within the neighborhood. This was in contradiction to face-to-face interaction, in the context that many of the residents did not know me, and perhaps they were not comfortable disclosing their contact information with someone they had not met in person. This was a social barrier at first, but was

Mittelmark discussed that compliance is a process wherein requesters use a series of requests (starting with modest request) to induce consenters to yield to a significant request, using the mechanisms of commitment and consistency (Mittelmark, pg. S25). This process resembles the initial approach taken in the establishment of the neighborhood watch program for my community. The ‘modest request’ was the request of contact information for the residents such as name, address, email, and phone numbers. This lead to the ‘significant request’ of using the contact information to request attendance at the first neighborhood watch meeting. A different approach would have been to use that of persuasion, which Mittelmark describes as the process through which advocates arouse emotions or provide arguments with the goal of attitude or behavior change, using mechanisms such as fear arousal or interpersonal influence (Mittelmark, pg. S25). In the contact information request letters that were sent out to residents, it only addressed the interest of wanting to establish a neighborhood watch program. No
information regarding crime statistics, or personal stories of being a victim of crime as a result of not having a neighborhood watch program was included. To draw more interest and consent to establish the program for the community, this approach may have been a better alternative to recruit more residential interest, although at this time we do have 19 active participants within our established Neighborhood Watch Program.

Putnam discussed that “social capital can help to mitigate the insidious effects of socioeconomic disadvantage” (Putnam, pg. 319). In the process of recruiting the interest of neighbors for the neighborhood watch program, those of lower socioeconomic status may not have been included. This is somewhat counterproductive since “poor people (by definition) have little economic capital and face formidable obstacles in acquiring human capital (that is, education), social capital is disproportionately important to their welfare” (Putnam, pg. 318). In actuality, all residents within the neighborhood of various economic backgrounds should have been included in the program interest recruitment, however, interest letters were only sent to residential homeowners, thus not incorporating those individuals who rent homes within the community, who may be more likely to have a lower socioeconomic status. Using the following logic model as a guide, individuals of a variety of backgrounds will contribute to the goals and future outcomes of the established neighborhood watch program for the neighborhood of District 2’s W. Murray Avenue in Durham, NC, thereby reflecting a safe and healthy environment for all.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inputs</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Outputs</th>
<th>Short/Long term Outcomes</th>
<th>Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Support: community advisors, grant funding local vendors/institutions  
• Potential neighborhood interest  
• Donated goods (i.e., brochures, neighborhood watch signs, security lights, etc.)  
• Meeting location  
• Block captain volunteers  
• Local authorities: Police, Neighborhood Improvement Services | • Train Block Captains and Community Support Workers  
• Recruit neighborhood participants, partners & facilities  
• Develop & implement neighborhood improvement plans  
• Participate in city wide crime prevention demos  
• Create neighborhood communication list serve | • Neighborhood watch program series for block captain presentations  
• Data collection tools  
• Number of new participants, partners and facilities available for use  
• Number of meetings  
• Identification of barriers to neighborhood change  
• Evaluation validation of program outputs | • Additional meeting locations  
• Increased residential participation  
• Improvement in perceptions of ability to improve neighborhood  
• Increase in empowerment and self-efficacy in participants and community advisors  
• Increased availability and demand of local neighborhood watch programs  
• Program sustained via community capacity | • Decrease in crime risk for residents  
• Increased social support & motivation for program participants  
• Daily use of new knowledge & transfer of skill/knowledge to others  
• Policy, systems & neighborhood environment change |

Figure 2: Established Neighborhood Watch Logic Model
References

7. Etzioni, Amitai; A Communitarian Position on Character Education
8. Etzioni, Amitai; Communitarianism
9. www.euphix.org
12. Goodwin, Shirley; Health and Crime, Chapter 3
15. www.manhattan-institute.org/...atlantic...broken_windows.pdf